

THE VICISSITUDES  
OF  
SHELLEY'S QUEEN MAB

BY  
H BUXTON FORMAN

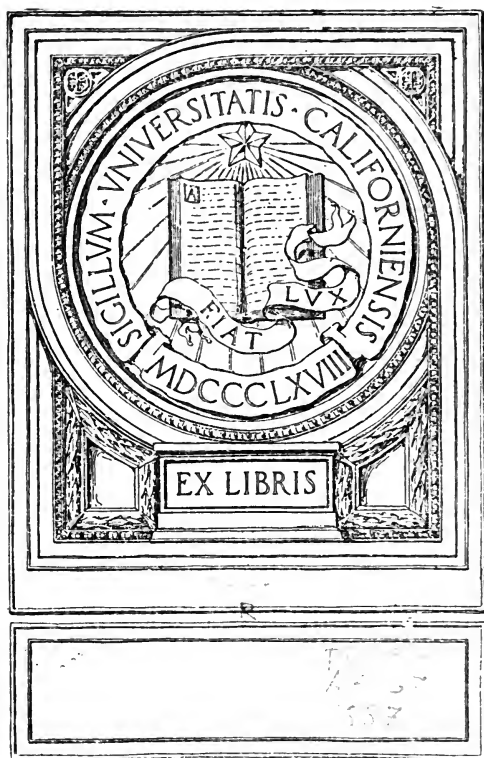


London  
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*The figure that you here see put  
Was for H. Buxton Forman cut,  
Amid his household gods to bide  
And relics culled from far and wide.  
This book is his on whom you look,  
For Scott his graving tackle took*

*And wished the man to watch therein  
That none by guile the book might win.  
Then wrote fur! of great and small  
The world holds books enough for all.  
Of roughly handling this beware,  
And put it in its place with care!*

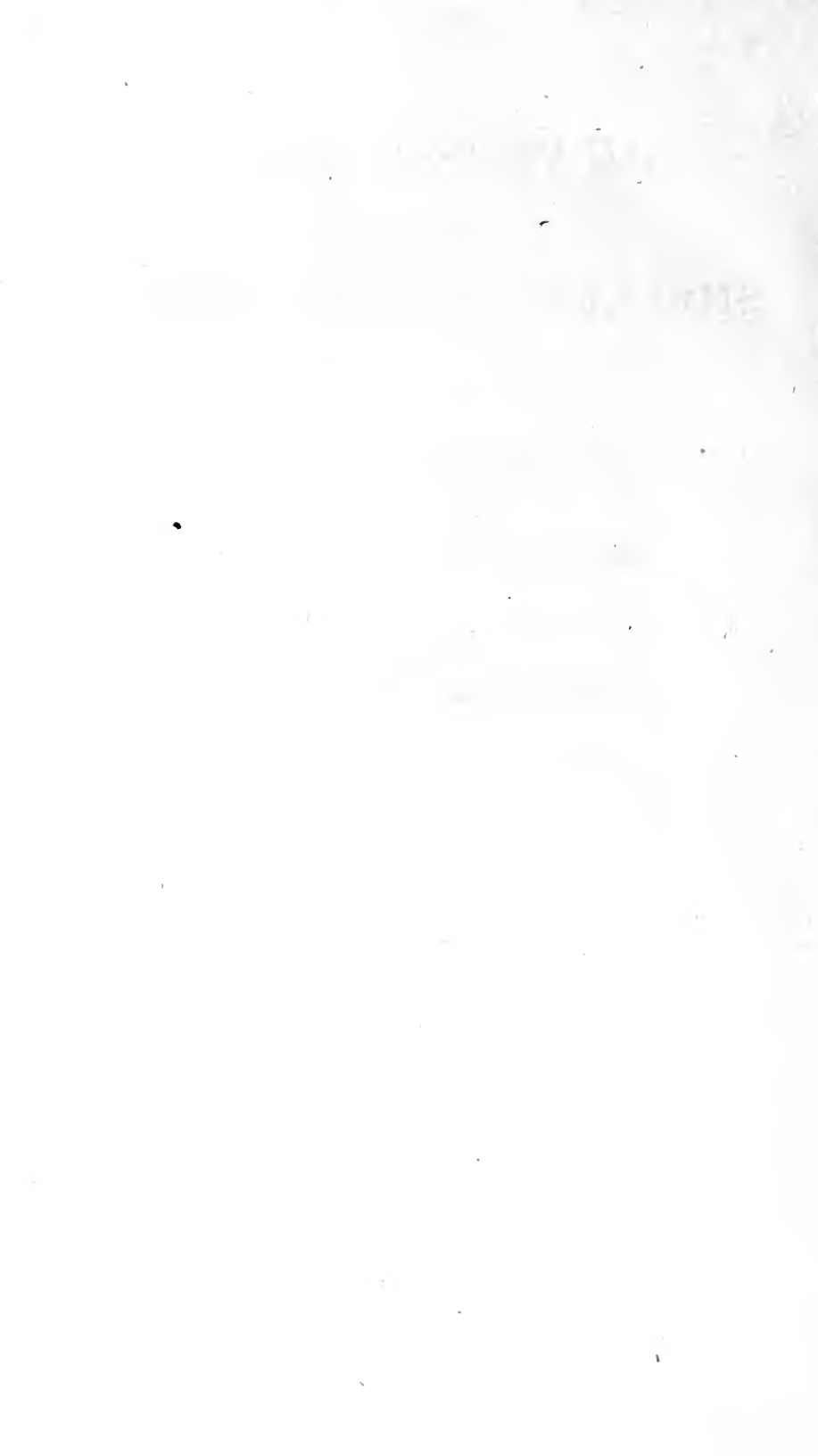




# THE VICISSITUDES OF QUEEN MAB

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UNIV. OF  
CALIFORNIA

THE VICISSITUDES  
OF  
SHELLEY'S QUEEN MAB

A  
CHAPTER  
IN THE  
HISTORY OF REFORM

BY  
H BUXTON FORMAN



London  
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## THE VICISSITUDES OF QUEEN MAB.

A PASSION for reforming the world is perhaps as exalted a form of enthusiasm as can be named in the catalogue of passions which besiege the human soul. In its integrity it manifests itself but seldom. Demagogues who clamour for a scrambling redistribution of this world's goods, and who have personally much to gain and nothing to lose, are common figures enough in the world's history. But the true Avatar of the reforming passion appears and re-appears at long intervals. In Judea we find him the friend of publicans and sinners, perfect in all the essentials of human goodness, one for whom the words self and abnegation had no separate existence. In Athens he appears in the person of Socrates, the man of subtle intellect, vast powers of body and mind, unflinching courage and infallible moral perceptions, egotistical perhaps in his manner and way of thought, button-holing the Athenians and ever insisting on the right, and facing all consequences, even to death, as one not made to die.

In modern England the archetypal victim of this passion was Shelley. It colours his whole life from a time long before he had reached manhood, and enters constantly into the details of his daily existence. Once convinced on a point of right or wrong, justice or injustice, and there was no *via media* for Shelley; right must be

done, and wrong must be abolished. Short of accomplishing those sublime ends, there was no rest or silence for him.

Once again in the English-speaking race has the victim of the reforming passion appeared. In the vastness of America a man with commensurate vastness of conception awoke from the dream of everyday life some thirty years ago, and preached a new gospel of reform. Walt Whitman, the poet of democracy and of the natural man, is the latest Avatar of the true passion for reform; and he goes on to this day adding and adding to the heads of his propaganda.

This passion for reforming the world, then, is generic. Other victims of it might be named; but these will suffice for the present purpose of illustrating the sense in which the passion is regarded as inspiring Shelley. Whence and how this passion was breathed into his nostrils when he became a living soul, is a problem for historians and psychologists. The whence indeed is not so hard a matter, for Shelley was born in 1792, when the spirit of revolt was in the air; and the French Revolution was the central historic fact during the period in which his early years fell. But why the concentrated spirit of that movement, wafted across the Channel, should have entered into the scion of a long line of Sussex squires, is a question bootless to ask and impossible to answer. Stranger still, and greatly to the advantage of humanity, the essential spirit of the Revolution took shape in Shelley free from the accidentals of violence and bloodshed; and his almost universal tolerance never taught him to tolerate cruelty or savagery in any form, no matter what the end to be attained. Thus the passion for reforming the world was with Shelley not only a passion for attaining somehow to the supremacy of good and the abolition of evil, but also for reforming fundamentally the means of reform; and that, I take it, is almost as high an ideal as the mind can shape. The Nazarene reformer confessed that he came not to bring peace but a sword: Shelley brought no sword, and would hear of none.

Now this reforming passion, which is probably the leading moral characteristic of Shelley as a historic

figure, has its inconveniences. It is inconvenient to the society in which the victim of the passion expounds and propagates his views; and by reaction it is highly inconvenient to the victim himself: indeed it renders him a victim in a double sense, in the first place to the passion that consumes him, and in the second to the selfish passions of those who surround him.

The Nazarene carpenter shall not preach universal love and virtual communism without incurring the deadly hatred of the ruling caste. As night follows day, so the agony and bloody sweat of Gethsemane and the awful consummation of Calvary follow the interference with the vested interests of Scribes and Pharisees in a land where, in the language of that poem which we meet to-day especially to consider—

“an inhuman and uncultured race  
Howled hideous praises to their Demon-God.”

The Athenian orator, moralist, reformer, and intellectual gymnast shall not waylay the men of Athens at banquets and baths and street-corners, to shame them with their follies and sins and weaknesses, and yet escape the customary forfeit. The bowl of hemlock shall settle the account. Even in free England you shall not dare to speak your convictions unless they be those of the majority. The reformer may not, perhaps, be put to death; but he shall be contemned and abused, deprived of natural and social rights, and forced to leave his country for fear of deeper outrage. Nay, even the boasted freedom of America in these latter days is a hollower sham than our own when real freedom of speech is in question; for there the “good gray poet,” the self-sacrificing Walt Whitman, was deprived of the government employ whereby he gained his bread, for no better reason than that he was the author of *Leaves of Grass*.

Now this passion for reforming the world—the passion which colours the whole life and work of the mature Shelley—took possession of him early. Intellectual obliquity, religious assumption or error, political iniquity, social oppression, or moral wrong, alike awoke in him a resentment not to be smothered for prudential or other

reasons. Thus his revolt was sometimes practical, sometimes theoretical or argumentative. As a lad at Eton it took a practical form; he resisted the atrocious system of fagging—resisted it by a simple dogged refusal to acquiesce. At Oxford it was intellectual revolt; he declined to accept the theory of a God, and set to work to prove in a pamphlet the necessity of atheism. Expelled from college, he openly and actively entered upon a political programme—he espoused the cause of Catholic Emancipation and the Repeal of the Union Act, and went to Ireland to propagate those doctrines; and, returning from this Irish campaign, he struck out bravely in favour of free thought and free speech by attacking Lord Ellenborough on the score of the sentence which he passed on Daniel Isaac Eaton for publishing the third part of Paine's *Age of Reason*. At length, ascending from details to a wider conception, he set to work while still a boy on the poem by which he is even now perhaps more widely known than by the supreme achievements of his manhood—a poem which is portentous rather than great, surprising rather than enjoyable, curious rather than instructive.

*Queen Mab* indeed, with all its faults, is an astonishing work for any one to have produced and put forth in bodily form in his twenty-first year; and although we cannot say of it as Emerson of Michelangelo's dome—"He builded better than he knew," we shall have to own before we quit the examination we have set ourselves to-day that he builded more solidly than he knew.

For if we follow up the story of *Queen Mab's* vicissitudes, as traceable in Shelley's history and correspondence, we shall find that this far from satisfactory performance is not only a sort of central point in the poet's early career, not only his first serious essay at large in the quixotic task of reforming the world by preachment, but also a receptacle wherein he enshrined earlier poetical efforts, a mine wherein he dug for later poetical efforts, a work which he did not abandon readily after getting it into print as he did many a better work, and finally a creation which, when he had abandoned *it*, he found by no means disposed to abandon *him*. This book, which he never even published, but merely

printed for private distribution and circulated sparingly, appears and re-appears in his life and in the posthumous history of his works, in connexion with momentous issues; and he was as powerless to check its vitality as his wife's imaginary *Frankenstein* was to unmake the monster he had made.

Like many other events of Shelley's life, the genesis of *Queen Mab* is a subject of much uncertainty. The most inaccurate of the poet's biographers, his well-disposed, admiring, but not very capable kinsman, Thomas Medwin, assigns the commencement of the composition to as early a time as the autumn of 1809, when Shelley was just turned seventeen: consistently with this view, Medwin states that the dedication to Harriet was written in 1810, and was addressed to his cousin, Harriet Grove. It is possible that Medwin saw some such early dedication to an early draft of the poem; but I know of no trustworthy evidence in support of the statement; and Shelley has himself left it on record that the dedication was to his first wife, Harriet Shelley, born Westbrook.

The second Mrs. Shelley, when editing her husband's works, certainly mentioned eighteen as the age at which *Queen Mab* was produced; but this statement doubtless derives from an obvious mistake in the letter which Shelley himself wrote to *The Examiner* in 1821, when in Italy; and internal evidence does not favour the view that the poem as printed in 1813 was composed as early as Shelley seems to have thought in 1821, and as his widow thought. It would not have been characteristic of Shelley to print in 1813 a work composed three years before: *Queen Mab* as we know it is far above the level of what Shelley was producing in 1810; and we may be sure that, if anything connected with the scheme of *Queen Mab* was done thus early, the work was wholly rewritten when about to be printed.

While recording that Shelley never published this work, his widow added that, when it was written, he had come to the decision that he was too young to be a "judge of controversies," and he was desirous of acquiring "that sobriety of spirit which is the characteristic of true heroism." "But," adds Mrs. Shelley, "he never

doubted the truth or utility of his opinions; and in printing and privately distributing 'Queen Mab' he believed that he should further their dissemination, without occasioning the mischief either to others or himself that might arise from publication."

We must accept the evidence which Lady Shelley has given us on this subject in the *Shelley Memorials*. In that invaluable collection of documents we find a letter to Mr. Thomas Hookham, bookseller, of Bond Street, dated the 18th of August 1812, wherein the poet says, "I enclose also, by way of specimen, all that I have written of a little poem begun since my arrival in England. I conceive I have matter enough for six more cantos. You will perceive that I have not attempted to temper my constitutional enthusiasm in that poem. Indeed, a poem is safe; the iron-souled Attorney-General would scarcely dare to attack. The Past, the Present, and the Future, are the grand and comprehensive topics of this poem. I have not yet half exhausted the second of them."

This passage, assumed by Lady Shelley to refer to *Queen Mab*, can scarcely do otherwise; and from it we learn that Shelley was actively engaged in the composition of the poem—perhaps half way through it—when he was just turned twenty. The poem was finished by the following February; and it was after that date that the voluminous notes were put together. The precise circumstances in which Shelley was induced to print the book privately have yet to be disclosed; but, in the absence of Mrs. Shelley's record of misgivings quite unusual in our poet's story, I should have thought it safe to assume that Mr. Hookham did not agree with his enthusiastic young friend about the probabilities of a prosecution by the iron-souled Attorney-General. That is what might be naturally and rationally gathered from the fact that Hookham did not undertake the publication of *Queen Mab*. It may also be assumed that the printer whom Shelley eventually employed to set his book up in type felt no confidence in the safety of a poem from attack by the Attorney-General, and did not choose to trust his name to the tender mercies of the iron-souled functionary. For the book bears no printer's name,



either on the title-page or elsewhere, but purports to have been "printed by P. B. Shelley, 23, Chapel Street, Grosvenor Square."

The fable built up from this circumstance, to wit that Shelley was practised in the art of printing, and set up his own *Queen Mab*, need not detain us, for the book is excellent and craftsmanlike in its typography, such a piece of work as a practised eye in the first quarter of this century might easily have assigned to the particular printing house employed by Shelley on this momentous occasion.

As to that modest and diffident attitude of mind already referred to—the view that he was "too young to be a judge of controversies," and that the opinions he had just finished embodying, though true and useful, might do harm by being openly promulgated—I must confess myself utterly unable to reconcile such a view with anything I know concerning Shelley. His loyalty to the truth in matters of public importance was absolute (shall we say quixotic?): when he had set himself to write anything which he considered important, he went through with it at fever heat, so to speak; and the fever still consumed him on completion of the work, until he could see it in shape to go forth to the world.

Let us look backwards and forwards a moment, within the circle if you please of our immediate subject. What do we find? Early in 1811 the Oxford undergraduate, whose intellect had been awakened to the untenableness of the theory of the existence of a God, had written a pamphlet to prove the necessity of atheism. He got it printed; and by his own personal intrepidity he got it actually published and circulated, strewed his publisher's shop-front with copies with his own hand, and (*pace* my good friend Mr. Rossetti) sent it to the whole bench of bishops. When taxed with the authorship, he accepted the disgrace of expulsion from college rather than disavow his intellectual offspring. And at last, when the views expressed in it had taken a new and poetic shape in *Queen Mab*, he reprinted his little tract in substance among the notes.

Passing over the Irish campaign, in which his considerable compositions were printed and eagerly circulated

as soon as possible, we come to his *Letter to Lord Ellenborough* on the free speech question. Immediately after it was written we find him prevailing on a Barnstaple printer to put it up in type, and taking care, when the provincial victim discovers what dangerous matter has issued from his quiet press, to secure the circulation of fifty copies. And here again *Queen Mab* offers an asylum for one of his unfortunates, for such parts as were not personal to Mr. Eaton and Lord Ellenborough were inserted in the notes in illustration of a cognate poetic passage.

In these notes, too, we find him enshrining a short poem of earlier date, for fear that it may not otherwise be preserved. Then, looking forward, we find him in the same year 1813 re-editing the long note on natural diet, the note illustrating the bloodless paradise in *Queen Mab*, whereof the most memorable figure is that now popular favourite, the lamb :

“ No longer now  
He slays the lamb that looks him in the face,  
And horribly devours his mangled flesh,  
Which still avenging nature's broken law,  
Kindled all putrid humours in his frame,  
All evil passions, and all vain belief,  
Hatred, despair, and loathing in his mind,  
The germs of misery, death, disease, and crime.”

The note on this passage, with additions, swells into one of the rarest of his pamphlets, *A Vindication of Natural Diet*, and actually finds a momentary publicity through the medium of a medical bookseller. Again, in 1814, he re-writes, reconstructs, and reprints a batch of controversial matter from the *Queen Mab* notes. *A Refutation of Deism*, in a dialogue inscribed *συνομιαν*—for those who know—embodies much of the old disproof of orthodox views, and becomes in its turn another of the scarcest of Shelley's books. Then at length, in or about 1815, he set seriously to work on the revision of the poem. It is true that this time he cut out, by implication, all the central portion, working upon the first two and last two cantos only, and converting them into Parts I and II of *The Daemon of the World*. At this point *Queen Mab* is drawn into indissoluble connexion

with Shelley's mature work ; for in 1816 came forth *Alastor and Other Poems*, a volume in which we find Part I of *The Dæmon of the World*, and also a fragment, reprinted from the sixth section of *Queen Mab*, under the separate title *Superstition*.

I can readily believe that by 1815 Shelley's faith in *Queen Mab* was shaken to its foundations ; for had he not far outstripped its overcharged rhetoric and bombastic fury ? And later than that we have plenty of evidence that he lost respect for the portentous volume of his nonage. But the bird's-eye view we have just been taking of our poet's paths to and from that poem will scarcely encourage you to think that, when he got it printed for private distribution in 1813, he had already developed a worldly-wise turn of mind, such as we find nowhere evidenced in all the course of his life and writing. No, depend upon it that the passion for reforming the world never burned so fitfully in Shelley as that would imply ; depend upon it that, if he could have persuaded Thomas Hookham or any other respectable publisher that *Queen Mab* was safe from the attacks of the iron-souled Attorney-General—depend upon it that Clark's pirated edition of 1821, which eventually led Shelley to protest against "all the bad poetry in the book," would not have been able to pose in booksellers' catalogues as the "first published edition." But I am getting on too fast in the chronology of my subject.

We had arrived at the year 1816, when, so far as *Queen Mab* was connected with Shelley's literary career, he may be said to have done with it. He had picked out, we may presume, all of it that he meant to preserve and had put that much behind him by giving it a place in his *Alastor* volume. But now comes the time when, if Shelley had done with *Queen Mab*, *Queen Mab* began to show that she had not done with him. At the end of that very year his children Ianthe and Charles were left motherless. Shelley, eager to assume the charge and control of his offspring, whom he had not removed from the care of their mother during his separation from her, met at the hands of his father-in-law, Mr. John Westbrook, an absolute refusal to give up possession of the children. A Chancery suit followed ; and the Lord Chancellor

decreed that the poet was not to be trusted with their bringing-up. The infants themselves, through their "next friend," to wit their grandfather Westbrook, filed a petition; and in support of it were put in evidence a copy of *Queen Mab* and a series of letters from their father to their mother. *Queen Mab* was accepted as evidence that Shelley's moral and religious principles were unsound; and other evidence was accepted for the allegation that his practice was in correspondence with those unsound principles. He was accordingly declared to be unfit for the charge of his children, and debarred from intermeddling in their education. Here then the Nemesis had found him! Four years before he had succeeded in finding, though not a publisher, nevertheless a printer, for *Queen Mab*. Had he failed to do so, there would have been no such formidable weapon for his children's "next friend" to carry into the Court of Chancery; and the suit might have taken quite another turn.

In 1818 Shelley left England never to return. As nearly as we have the means of judging he had distributed some seventy copies of *Queen Mab*, and had ceased to occupy himself with it in any way. From statements of his own to which we shall presently come, it is clear he can have had no copies with him in Italy. His own private copy, worked upon in 1815 for *The Dæmon of the World*, had, according to one story, been left behind at Marlow, and according to another, given away to Mr. Brooks, publisher, of Oxford Street, of whom more anon; and the copy which he had given to Mary Godwin in 1814 is more likely to have got astray by accident before the exodus from England than after Shelley's death. That it did get astray is evident from the fact that it turned up in a sale room a few years since.

Well, then, we may think without lack of reason that after the decision of the question whether Shelley might be trusted with his own children—a decision grievously afflicting to his spirit on all grounds, and greatly influenced by the silent testimony of his first really considerable essay in literature—we may think, I say, that the household as transferred to the softer influences of Italy had ceased to regard *Queen Mab* as any longer among the living factors in their affairs.

But early as the poet was snatched from an inappreciative generation by the inexorable sea which he so deeply loved, he yet lived long enough to see the second resurrection of *Queen Mab*, a resurrection this time to a use very different from that of becoming the instrument with which its creator's heart was probed to the quick.

When the young enthusiast of 1813 caused two hundred and fifty copies of that ambitious book to be printed, and had it executed on fine paper in the belief that, though the aristocrats of that day might not read it, their sons and daughters might, his faith in his book was obviously large and affluent. Eight years later, when William Clark issued from his house in the Strand his piratical edition of that book, the news came to Shelley in Italy, and found him in a very different frame of mind. He had evidently ceased to regard the work seriously. It is thus that he writes to his friend John Gisborne:—

"A droll circumstance has occurred. *Queen Mab*, a poem written by me when very young, in the most furious style, with long notes against Jesus Christ and God the Father, and the king, and bishops, and marriage, and the devil knows what, is just published by one of the low booksellers in the Strand, against my wish and consent, and all the people are at loggerheads about it. Horace Smith gives me this account. You may imagine how much I am amused. For the sake of a dignified appearance, however, and really because I wish to protest against all the bad poetry in it, I have given orders to say that it is all done against my desire, and have directed my attorney to apply to Chancery for an injunction, which he will not get."

The notes appear to have left a stronger impression on the author's mind than the poem itself, only recollected as being "in the most furious style";—for, in writing to Horace Smith at Versailles on the same theme, he confesses to considerable ignorance as to the subject of the poem, thus—

"If you happen to have brought a copy of Clark's edition of *Queen Mab* for me, I should like very well to see it.—I really hardly know what this Poem is about. I am afraid it is rather rough."

In the meantime he had written to the editor of *The Examiner* a letter which had duly appeared in that paper, and which is now well known. In it Shelley distinctly says that he has not seen the poem for some years, but does not doubt that it is perfectly worthless in point of literary composition, crude and immature, and better fitted to injure than to serve the cause of freedom. He mentions the instruction to his solicitors to apply for an injunction, and also his doubts of success, and concludes with the following broadside:—

“Whilst I exonerate myself from all share in having divulged opinions hostile to existing sanctions, under the form, whatever it may be, which they assume in this poem, it is scarcely necessary for me to protest against the system of inculcating the truth of Christianity and the excellence of Monarchy, however true or however excellent they may be, by such equivocal arguments as confiscation, and imprisonment, and invective, and slander, and the insolent violation of the most sacred ties of nature and society.”

This second resurrection of *Queen Mab*, we see, was treated by Shelley in no very serious mood, except so far as it re-aroused in his spirit the sense of wrongs to himself and others intimately connected with the earlier days of the book. Nevertheless, it was a thoroughly serious affair. We hear from Trelawny how he encountered the book at Geneva, and crossed the Alps to visit the author; and Edward Williams, who was by no means wanting in literary capacity and judgment, was reading it with much approval on Sunday the 30th of June 1822, as we learn from the following entry in his journal:—

“Read some of Shelley’s ‘Queen Mab,’ an astonishing work. The enthusiasm of his spirit breaks out in some admirable passages in the poetry, and the notes are as subtle and elegant as he could now write.”

The advanced revolutionary character of the book no doubt blinded Williams’s better critical judgment: he would assuredly have found on reflexion that the notes to *Hellas* were decidedly more elegant than those to *Queen Mab*.

But it is not in its effect on the minds of Shelley’s circle of friends that the new career opening for *Queen*

*Mab* is to be traced. The poet who sought a publisher in vain in 1813 sought equally in vain in 1821 a means for restraining piratical publishers from issuing his book. *Queen Mab* was outside the pale of the law so far as regards any protection which the author might wish to obtain from those who chose to issue it without his leave. But that did not prevent the "iron-souled Attorney-General," or his equivalent, from performing in due time his office; and, though Shelley might not restrain "low booksellers in the Strand" from trading in his mental property, the Society for the Suppression of Vice soon found means to arrest the doings of Mr. Clark. He, it is said, was tried at the Old Bailey, and sentenced to imprisonment, but pardoned on giving up the remainder of his edition to the Society for the Suppression of Vice. If this legend is authentic in its entirety, the Society must have been culpably careless as to the disposal of its plunder; for Clark's edition is common enough in many forms. One variant of it is marked by the omission of some of the most trenchant passages; and in several forms the actual sheets, issued originally by Clark, recur with the imprint of the arch-republican publisher Richard Carlile.

Carlile not only persistently distributed pirated copies of *Queen Mab*; but no sooner was Shelley dead than the man somehow obtained possession of the remaining copies (a hundred and eighty) of the poet's own edition of 1813. He says in *The Republican* that he bought them; but from whom he omits to reveal. Where they had been lying I know not; but the affair looks suspicious—looks as if the holder had only awaited the poet's death to realize what belonged to the poet's heirs, executors, or assigns.

As early as 1821 a pocket edition bearing an American imprint appeared; but this I consider to be an English edition in disguise. In 1826 came out what the Americans call a vest-pocket edition, a minute volume bearing Carlile's imprint once more. This, being sold at the price of half-a-crown, was regarded at the time as an edition for "the mechanic and labourer"; and I should think, from the general air of copies I have seen, that

the radical mechanic gave it large and eager patronage. In 1829 Mr. Brooks, still keeping dark the revised copy, if it be true that Shelley gave it him, published a handsome reprint, fit to rank with his other Shelley re-issues of that year. And in 1830 Stephen Hunt furnished the more squeamish of Shelley's admirers with a proper Bowdlerized edition. His passion for reforming the world was of the feeblest and most flickering kind, to judge from this example. Here was no mere excision of a few trenchant phrases; but *Queen Mab* itself was reformed with a vengeance: "free from all the objectionable passages" says the title-page,—that is to say, shorn of some eight hundred lines of verse and of the whole mass of notes.

In the following year, 1831, our trans-Atlantic cousins did something towards setting *Queen Mab* on her feet again after this ruthless mutilation of Stephen Hunt's. They printed what is now recognized as the first American issue—Wright and Owen's edition, in which certain curious accidentals, proper to the English piracies, are faithfully reproduced, and the extract from Plutarch is, in a truly but no doubt unintentionally comic vein, ascribed to Plautus.

A year later came out another English pocket edition, published, not by Richard Carlile, but by his wife and sons, to be absorbed in 1833 by Mr. Brooks, who re-issued it. That edition was an important one: I take it to have been largely consumed by the Owenites, with whom Brooks was connected, and to whom *Queen Mab* is said to have stood in the position of a gospel. It is a rearranged edition: Shelley's notes are transferred from their place at the end of the book to the position of foot-notes; and this arrangement of course facilitated the studies both of the special sect of Owenites and of the general body of radicals to whom *Queen Mab* was now appealing in all seriousness.

It is difficult to measure the work of unsettlement effected by these several editions, getting ever cheaper and cheaper. This same little edition passed later on into the hands of the notable free-thought and free-press publishers, Hetherington and Watson; and it was not long before James Watson got into existence that



excellent cheap volume which was the current edition of *Queen Mab* when I came to London as a boy in 1860, and which had then been in currency for about twenty years.

In the meantime salesmen and publishers of *Queen Mab* had been prosecuted and persecuted one after another, till at length the time came to decide the question how the work should be dealt with in a collected edition of Shelley's poems edited by his widow. In the first issue of those works, *Queen Mab* was represented by a selection only. In the second issue, through Mrs. Shelley's urgency with Mr. Moxon, the whole book was included, poem and notes. The result was curious. Mr. Moxon was prosecuted; but the prosecution originated among the very set who had been so largely influenced in their development by the circulation of *Queen Mab*. Libel prosecutions had gone on with good success for some time, when it occurred to my friend Mr. W. J. Linton that a test case might be instituted by prosecuting Mr. Moxon. There should not be one law for the "low booksellers of the Strand" and another for the aristocratic booksellers of Dover Street. Accordingly a copy of Mrs. Shelley's second collected edition was purchased in order to prove the sale in the ordinary way (I have had the copy in my hands). Mr. Moxon was prosecuted for a blasphemous and seditious libel, convicted notwithstanding the eloquent and masterly defence of Talfourd, and heavily fined. Mr. Linton's party, be it recorded, having gained their point, which was to obtain a *reductio ad absurdum*, offered to pay the fine; but I have good reason to believe Mr. Moxon sternly refused the proffered amends.

There is no need to go further into the details of *Queen Mab* libel prosecutions or *Queen Mab* reprints, or to touch upon the many worthless reviews of the book in early days. The poem and its notes have played a considerable part in the growth of free thought in England and America, especially among the working classes; and I am assured by free-thought publishers and booksellers that they can still sell the book readily and widely enough. But other things are now taking its place as an instrument of education; and *Queen Mab*

is settling down to its final station among Shelley's *juvenilia*.

I hope it will not be thought that I have been unduly hard upon this book, which Shelley himself, when grown up, treated so contemptuously. But in truth I am convinced that the same Nemesis which found the author of *Queen Mab* in the Court of Chancery, and pursued his adherents when he was no longer assailable in the flesh, has pursued also his literary fame.

*Queen Mab* drew together into an easy compass, and expressed in what Shelley calls "a furious style,"—to a multitude of minds a very commendable style,—all the leading tenets and dogmas of all the leading revolutionary writers; and this is why the book was drawn up to an eminence which it was not fitted to occupy, and spread abroad among an immense audience whom it was but partially fitted to enlighten.

This very furiousness of its style and largeness of its circulation tended to set the better educated and more cultured of Englishmen against the author, whose other works, great and noble though they be, had for long and long no circulation of any significance; and were often eschewed simply as works by the author of the notorious *Queen Mab*.

Thus, I do not doubt that, if Shelley had failed in 1813 to find a printer as he did to find a publisher for *Queen Mab*, the growth of his fame and better influence would have been quicker. To this day, I believe, there are ten who know Shelley as the author of *Queen Mab* for one who knows that he wrote *Prometheus Unbound*. And, as *Queen Mab* does not exalt and strengthen the spirit, while *Prometheus Unbound* does, we who really care for Shelley as a poet, as a man, as an influence, want to see all that changed.

The true Shelley was not the breaker-down but the builder-up. He built, it is true, in precarious altitudes, often of material only too fragile in its beauty; but his ardent love for his fellow-men, his unwavering belief in human perfectibility, his impulsive rushes of true enthusiasm, are great and rare qualities; and never were they more greatly needed than in this present age of pessimism and failing faith.

## THE VICISSITUDES OF QUEEN MAB.

23

The Shelley of *Queen Mab* is not the lyrist whose song transports the soul into a purer atmosphere ; but, long before he rose to the sublime heights of *Prometheus*,

Knowledge and truth and virtue were his theme,  
And lofty hopes of divine liberty.

That passionate adoration of truth and freedom drove him at times "like a goad" : if I might borrow a figure from those holy Hebrew scriptures with which he dealt so hardly in *Queen Mab*, I would say that, as the blood-thirsty Elija girded up his loins and ran before the chariot of his blood-thirsty King, when the spirit of his blood-thirsty God was upon him, so Shelley ran before the chariot of incarnate Liberty with his loins girded, outstripping even that quick spirit, and seeing visionary goals at which perhaps even Liberty shall never arrive. At such times, when the spirit of his own gods was upon him, he broke forth into imperishable song such as none but he has uttered in our tongue. Thus to-day we want to see him honoured, not as the gymnast in litigious intellectual causes, or the assailant of things already failing and redolent of decay, but as the poet whose song celebrates love, and hope, and freedom, and, above all, that large and universal tolerance without which love, and hope, and freedom in their highest form cannot be.





*London :*

*Printed by RICHARD CLAY & SONS, Bread Street Hill.*

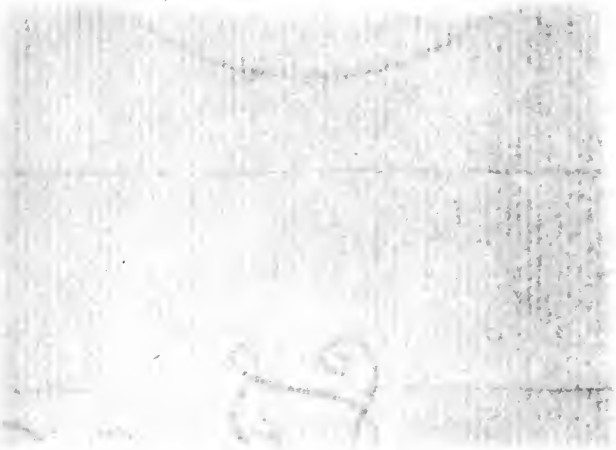
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